

The Practice of Sharing a Historical Muse

By Bob Henderson

Sharing an imaginative energy for the storied landscape is one kind of pedagogical passion. I had taken on the challenge of offering this particular passion to my fellow travellers. With students, the practice of peppering a trip with a historical muse involves focussed readings, in the moment stories, planned ceremonies and rituals and, of course, campfire storytelling sessions (Henderson, 2008). Some of all of this was shared on the Mara-Burnside.

When starting out on the trail, a reading by 1836 explorer George Back can help bring on a mimetic feeling of excitement and anxiety. As he began his river trip down the Great Fish River (later renamed the Back River), George Back (2005) wrote the following:

There is something exciting in the first start, even upon an ordinary journey. The bustle of preparation—the act of departing, which seems like a decided step taken—the prospect of change, and consequent stretching out of the imagination—have at all times the effect of stirring the blood, and giving a quicker motion to the spirits. It may be conceived then with what sensations I set forth on my journey into the Arctic wilderness. I had escaped from the wretchedness of a dreary and disastrous winter—from scenes and tales of suffering and death—from wearisome inaction and monotony—from disappointment and heart-sickening care. Before me were novelty and enterprise; hope, curiosity, and the love of adventure were my companions; and even the prospect of difficulties and dangers to be encountered, with the responsibility inseparable from command, instead of damping rather heightened the enjoyment of the moment. In turning my back on the Fort, I felt my breast lightened, and my spirit, as it were, set free again; and with a quick step, Mr. King and I (for my companion seemed to share in the feeling) went on our way rejoicing. (pp. 256–257)

The passage is followed by the general account of the 1836 trip. I suggest that as one learns the stories (people and event) of the immediate terrain of travel and the general area, then the trip can be more a pilgrimage than a series of days of highs and lows, exciting challenges and mundane routine. It isn't the strongest person who endures, it is the person filled up or swelling with the knowledge and spirit of the place. Phaedrur, the traveller in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, failed in his pilgrimage efforts: "He speculated that the other pilgrims, the ones who reached the mountain, probably sensed the holiness of the mountain so intensely that each footstep was an act of devotion, an act of submission to this holiness" (Pirsig, 1974, p. 205). Holiness perhaps, devotion certainly: the place explored as a muse through time can channel the best of travel energy and spirit.

Later on in the trip when an outstanding traveller's challenge arises, it is wise to return to the George Back "starting out" quote. This was done before our group's five-kilometre Burnside River Canyon portage. Once the "act of devotion" idea is revisited, I read a portage passage from another Arctic traveller, P.G. Downes (1943). A sample of the long passage follows here:

Packing over the portages has a peculiar limiting and brutalizing effect on the mind. Personally, I found myself becoming less averse to it. . . . There is an odd, savage, masochistic joy in finding yourself able to pile on more and more until you can just stagger to your feet. As you trudge on, unable to turn your head to right or left, unable to lift your eyes more than a few feet from the ground, the whole world begins to shrink into a focus of pain and short gasps of breath; the deadening pressure of the strap on the top of your head seems to be forcing it down through your shoulder blades. . . . Instead of a desire to rest, a furious impatience begins to fire you with dull sullen rage. The crushing weight, after a while, sets up

a rhythm with the pounding of the blood in your ears, and to break this oppressive thundering you alter your pace to a faster shuffle. . . . At the end of the trail, you slowly crouch down until the bottom of the load touches the ground. Bent over backward, you stare up into the sky and carefully remove the top of the load from the back of our neck. . . . You feel curiously light. . . .

There are few sweeter words to the man of the North than: "By God, there is a man that can pack!" The North is so crushing, it gives away before the ineptitude of man so slightly, its rewards are so withheld, that these small conceits are magnified out of all proportion and are warming wine to the spirit." (Downes, 1943, pp. 136–137)

At the portage completion we gather for a portage ceremony. A thimble full of rum is distributed in turn. Each tripper is knighted, as it were, with a paddle touched to each shoulder with the line, "By God, there's a Man/Woman who can pack," proclaimed as each one downs the rum with enthusiasm. It is explained that the voyageurs of the Canadian fur trade were rewarded in a similar fashion following landmark events.

"It is not romanticism, but rather a widening of reality."

While the portage passage/voyageur ceremony represents a staged event, another strategy to bring the storied landscape alive is a more random peppering of stories, where the context matches or where an entertainment moment would be valued. (I am always reading the group and terrain for the tacit knowledge of suitability for the historic muse.)

If the mystic of wildlife is mentioned, it might be a time to share the George Grinnell (1996) passage: "What Art [Moffat] had understood, and what we had not, is that God is not he who kills and eats, but that

which is killed and is eaten" (p. 99).

If the value of campfire is noted, I might choose to draw from the reading kit, in this case Peter Browning's (1989) fire passage:

Fire was not only comfort and convenience and necessity, it was a means by which we felt that we were masters of the situation. . . . what John and I needed was the symbol and not the actuality of power, and for this the small comfort of a modest fire served quite well. (p. 22)

As one's knowledge of travel literature develops, the possibility abounds to share this pedagogical passion. A challenge is not to over do it; tacit knowing is also being developed.

The American poet, Wallace Stevens (1942), has written of imagination: "Imagination is a liberty of the mind, a power of the mind and over the possibilities of things. . . . we have it, because we don't have enough without it" (p. 138/150). To imagine, we have openness to ideas. It starts with an imaginative spark of possibility. The possibility is that the stories of the place, and indeed the stories we create in the present, become alive and bring meaning to time, then and now. The theory is that the historical muse is a solid part of place-responsive pedagogy, that a storied landscape leads beyond meaning to caring and perhaps acting on behalf of the place. All this is a sincere step towards cultivating ecological consciousness—a part of an educative process. That is the theory.

The practice is to pepper the trail with stories, rituals/ceremonies, and readings that, for those that grab onto the imaginative spark of possibility, will render the past as a felt experience. It is not romanticism, but rather a widening of reality. The practice can lead to, in theory, what novelist James David Duncan (1985) explores in *The River Why*. He writes of characters with "native intelligence:"

. . . it evolves as the native involves himself in his region. A non-native awakes in the morning in a body in a

bed in a room in a building on a street in a county in a state in a nation. A native awakes in the center of a little cosmos—or a big one, if his intelligence is vast—and he wears this cosmos like a robe, senses the barely perceptible shiftings, migrations, moods and machinations of its creatures, its growing green things, its earth and sky. (Duncan, 1985, pp. 53–54)

The big cosmos I aspired to develop and share was the storied landscape of the barren grounds. Franklin's Arctic Land Expedition of 1819–21 was a primary source.¹ Some might have felt that imaginative spark. Others were always more imaginatively driven towards the animals, the landforms, the body in motion. All of these attentions were shared amongst our group in organized sessions and informal moments. There was a happy air of eclecticism with our group. Much talent, much knowledge, much to share by way of theory and practice. We were, in the words of educator David Orr (1992), "re-educating people [ourselves] in the art of living well where they are" (p. 130).

Note:

1. See the four journals from the First Franklin Arctic Land Expedition, 1819–22:

Houston, C.S. & MacLaren, I.S. (1984). *Arctic ordeal: The journal of John Richardson, surgeon-naturalist with Franklin, 1820–1822*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Houston, C.S. & MacLaren, I.S. (1994). *Arctic artist: The journal and paintings of George Back, midshipman with Franklin, 1819–1822*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Houston, C.S. (1974). *To the Arctic by canoe 1819–1821: The journal and paintings of Robert Hood, midshipman with Franklin*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Franklin, Sir John (1988). *Thirty years in the Arctic regions*. Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press.

References

Back, G. (2005). *Narrative of the Arctic land expedition to the mouth of the Great Fish River and along the shores of the Arctic Ocean in the years 1833, 1834 and 1835*. Boston, MA: Adamant Media Corporation.

Browning, P. (1975). *The last wilderness*. San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books.

Downes, P.G. (2004). *Sleeping island*. N. Ferrisburg, VT: Heron Dance Press.

Duncan, J.D. (1985). *The river why*. New York: Bantam Books.

Grinnell, G. (1996). *A death in the barrens*. Toronto, ON: Northern Books

Henderson, B. (2008). Experientially teaching Canadian travel literature on the trail and in the classroom. In L. Christensen, M.C. Long & F. Waage (Eds.), *Teaching North American environmental literature* (pp. 392–402). New York: The Modern Language Association of America.

Orr, D. (1992). *Ecological literacy: Education and the transition to a postmodern world*. New York: State University of New York.

Pirsig, R. (1974). *Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance*. New York: Bantam Books.

Stevens, W. (1942). *The necessary angel: Essays on reality and the imagination*. New York: Vintage Books.

Recently retired from years of teaching outdoor education at McMaster University, Bob Henderson is a long-time contributor to Pathways.